

Taliban unrepentant after attack on Pakistani teen, vow to kill her

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The Taliban is threatening to kill a 14-year-old Pakistani girl whom it shot for helping other girls go to school — if she survives a wounding that has made her a hero to many Pakistanis.

Schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head and neck, was airlifted Thursday (Oct. 11) to a military hospital for her own protection after the attack that also injured two of her friends. A hospital spokesman described her condition as "satisfactory" on Friday.

Maj. Gen. Asim Saleem Bajwa said she is being kept unconscious and on a ventilator. He said the bullet entered her head and went into her neck toward her spine, but it was too soon to say whether she had any significant head injury.

Pakistanis in government and media have expressed outrage over the shooting that happened Tuesday as the girls were boarding a school bus for home. Malala was targeted for speaking out about girls' education in Swat Valley in northwestern Pakistan, an area where Islamists who oppose schools for girls have much control.

The Taliban admitted to the shooting and authorities have offered a reward of \$100,000 for the capture of the assailant. The Taliban says it's not done with Malala, according to Pakistan's Dawn newspaper, and has threatened her family and vowed to kill her.

"It's absolutely devastating," said Ayesha Siddiqa, a social scientist and defense analyst in Islamabad.

In 2009, Malala wrote a blog under a pseudonym about living under Taliban rule for the BBC in the Urdu language — winning a national peace prize for her efforts.

"I realized the importance of education when it was banned in Swat," Malala said in an August interview with Black Box Sounds, a production company in Pakistan. "I wanted to be able to attend school again. I wished for peace in Swat and that I could go to school."

Until 2007, when the Taliban came to power in the Swat Valley, it had been a haven for honeymooners and was known as the Switzerland of Pakistan for its beautiful, mountainous landscape. But the group's hold over the region instilled fear in the population and made it dangerous for young girls to get an education. The Taliban burned down hundreds of schools for girls and threatened teachers and female students.

The Taliban was largely driven out of the region in a Pakistani military operation in 2009 — bringing relative safety to its residents.

"Since they were driven out of Swat, the Taliban has not been able to launch large-scale attacks on schools," said Anatol Lieven, professor at the war studies department of King's College London. "This proves that they have a presence in the Swat Valley and can carry out individual attacks. But the level of violence is nothing like it was before 2009."

Analysts said that they believed that the attack on Malala was the Taliban trying to show it still wields control in the area.

"The Taliban is clearly asserting themselves, saying A, we have not been eliminated, B, we can still target what we consider symbolic targets, and the message is that the government is not in control of the area," said Frederic Grare, South Asia Program director the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a nonprofit organization promoting international cooperation.

"Whether this is true or not is a different matter," Grare said. "But that's the message that they are trying to convey."

Analysts said that regardless of the revulsion over the attack, it won't lessen Taliban support in the short run.

"The news their supporters get is probably filtered through the Taliban sources so in some sense this girl may have been made out to be a monster or a sort of a Western agent," said S. Athar Hussain, director of the Asia Research Center at the London School of Economics. "At the same time, it was a show of force (by the Taliban) to say they can control people and for even a small disagreement with them, they can take revenge. It was demonstrating to the government and the public how powerful they are."

"Unfortunately, they are quite powerful right now," he added. "The fact that they can walk in and shoot the girl with impunity serves notice to everyone else that if you disagree you might meet the same treatment."

Peace activist Saeeda Diep, of the Institute for Peace and Secular Studies in Lahore, said that the government would protect people like Malala and her father — who has also been threatened — but that it was not a solution.

"The government needs to take action to get rid of extremists," she said. "She (Malala) was fortunate that she got the peace prize and people know her, but there are many victims like her. We can relate Malala to 100,000 girls in the country."

Still, in her August interview, Malala showed hope in her country — a hope that Pakistanis want to preserve.

"When I see the current situation here, I thank God for the peace that prevails and that girls can attend school," she said. "My purpose is to serve humanity and fight for their rights."